



Will the Real John Jones Please Stand?

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Background

In Wales, a patronymic naming system was used, similar to the Scandinavians. From the advent of surnames, Welsh children's surnames were based on the given name of their father. This resulted in a relative lack of unique surnames. Common surnames in Wales include Jones (as a variation of John), Williams, Phillips, Richards, Evans, Lloyd, James, Thomas, Roberts, Lewis and Griffiths. Unlike Scandinavians, they didn't add the word 'son' or 'datter' at the end, they most often simply added an 's'.

In early times, the word 'ab' or 'ap' would be placed between the given name of a son and his father (ex. Thomas ap Richard). This could extend to a grandfather as well. Surnames such as Prichard (for ap Richard) or Bowen (for ab Owen) also often originate in Wales. For daughters, the words 'ferch' or 'verch' were used.

Generally, this patronymic system remained in place longer in northern Wales whereas fixed surnames, according to the English style, were adopted earlier in south Wales. In any case, when researching back, one never knows when their pedigree line will start using the patronymic system. As a result, many mistakes are made. There are several good books and articles on the Welsh patronymic naming system. One good starting point is the FamilySearch article titled "Wales Personal Names" (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Wales_Personal_Names).

John or Evan Jones or John or Evans?

Anyone researching their Welsh ancestry will run into the problem of having several persons with the same name as your ancestor and have difficulty determining which one is yours. John, the son of John, could be named John Jones, John John or, less commonly, Evan Jones or Evan John. Regardless of the common names you are dealing with, this lesson illustrates the need for thorough analysis and details ways of doing this.

Key Principles

- **Never Trust Hints.** Computer algorithms are not designed well enough to deal with this complex problem.
- **Details are EVERYTHING.** These include personal names, family members, place names (including farm names), occupations, and religion.

- **Original Records Must Be Analyzed.** Originals often include detail not found in indexes or extracts. They also help to uncover transcription errors.
- **Family Reconstruction.** The other “John Jones’s” who are not yours are important to understand because they help eliminate information that does not apply to your “John Jones”

The Study

Which county has the most John Jones’s? The 1851 Wales Census index at Ancestry was used as a start. First, the total number of males in each of 13 Welsh counties was tabulated, followed by the number of males named John Jones. For all of Wales, 2.74% of males were named John Jones. In Merionethshire, there were 1,050 males named John Jones, which had the highest percentage with 5.26% That’s effectively 1-in-20 boys were given this name. It’s an astoundingly high number. Caernarvonshire, Cardiganshire, and Denbighshire all topped 4%

The next focus was on finding the parish with the most John Jones’s born in Merionethshire. Several sources were needed to identify the parishes that were in Merionethshire, including parish lists on the FamilySearch Wiki, GenUKI.org.uk, and Phillimore’s *Atlas and Index of Parish Registers*. The Merionethshire parish browse in the 1851 Census database was too inconsistent to be helpful.

Thirty-six Merioneth parishes were settled on and compared to the list of 1,050 John Jones. Birthplaces listed were a combination of one of the 36 parishes, villages, county only and illegible. About 910 were readily able to be associated with a parish. The lesson is that census searches by birth parish or parish of residence in Wales are risky.

One other item of note is that 179 of the 1,050 (17%) were living in another county in Wales. This means it is important to consider the possibility of migration. The England census would need to be searched for those who could have easily migrated to England. This also does not include the ones born in Beddgelert, Merionethshire but residing in Beddgelert, Caernarvonshire (an apparent quirk in the system).

Censuses

Using only those with readily identifiable birth parishes, the parish with the most John Jones’s was Dolgellau (aka Dolgelley) with 83. For analysis, the group born between 1830 and 1839 was analyzed. The 1851 Wales census index at Ancestry counted 13 born during these years.

A similar search was conducted in the 1841 Wales census. Since the birth parish is not asked for, those extracted were residing in Dolgellau in 1841. A whopping 25 were recorded. Without additional detail from the original record, based on age and names of parents, only 4 could be matched to 1851 families. A review of the original records for father’s occupation and specific residence failed to make additional connections. The next step would be to compare siblings between censuses.

Church Records

FindMyPast has digitized the Church in Wales (Anglican) parish registers deposited at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth. They are indexed and are also browsable. A search for John Jones baptisms at Dolgelley between 1830 and 1839 uncovered 16 entries. These included an Owen and two John Owen Jones’s. Without looking at the original, two of these could be adequately applied to the 1851 Census.

A search of burials of John Jones in Dolgelley from 1830 to 1850 for those born between 1830 and 1839 uncovered 9, including a John Owen and an Owen Jones.

This doesn't account for non-conformity. According to GenUKI, Dolgelley Parish has 13 non-conformist chapels in the area which will likely account for other John Jones.

Other Records

- Wills – Digitized and indexed at the National Library of Wales website
- Newspapers - Digitized and indexed at the National Library of Wales website
- Tithe Maps - Digitized and indexed at the National Library of Wales website. Excellent for farm names.